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SUBJECT: DASHNAK LEADERS TELL AMBASSADOR VIEWS ON
GEORGIAN-ARMENIANS, TURKEY, RUSSIA

REF: YEREVAN 629

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Classified By: AMB Marie Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[11](#). (C) SUMMARY: Top Dashnaksutyun party leaders called on the Ambassador to broaden their contacts with USG. The Dashnaks fretted about the rights and welfare of Georgia's Armenian minority, which they portrayed as a dangerous crisis with the potential to deteriorate into irredentist conflict. They "favored" normalized relations with Turkey, but at the same time made clear their deep skepticism, unwillingness to de-emphasize calls for "genocide" recognition, or to disavow future territorial claims against Turkey. They contended that U.S. recognition of "Armenian genocide" would galvanize Turkey to face its history, and that relations among all three countries -- U.S., Turkey, and Armenia -- would shortly emerge the stronger for that.

[12](#). (C) The Ambassador rebutted the latter claim with our assessment that Turkey would most likely respond badly to such a U.S. proclamation, and she urged that Armenia should not miss the historic opportunity we now have to achieve normalization and open borders with Turkey. The senior Dashnaks argued that Russia and Turkey were moving toward a common agenda, which is dangerous for Armenia and counter to U.S. interests. The party's ranking leader, Hrant Markarian, also complained about his U.S. visa ineligibility, portraying it unfair and an impediment to the party's relations with the United States. END SUMMARY

MEET THE DASHNAKS

[13](#). (C) Senior Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, often known simply as Dashnaksutyun, the Armenian word for Federation) leaders Hrant Markarian, Vahan Hovhanissian, Hrayr Karapetian, and Giro Manoyan called on the Ambassador December 11 at their request. The ARF has a complex and distributed leadership structure. However, ARF "Bureau" chairman Hrant Markarian -- who has something of a sinister reputation in Armenia -- is widely understood to be the most senior leader and was treated as the senior member by his colleagues. Deputy Parliament Speaker Hrayr Karapetian has a higher-ranking title in the National Assembly than his colleague and predecessor in the deputy speakership, but ARF Parliamentary Faction Leader Vahan Hovhanissian is the higher-profile public figure. Canadian-Armenian Giro Manoyan is the "International Secretary" of the ARF's ruling "Bureau," which means he is responsible for coordinating with the worldwide ARF movement, which they tell us has affiliate organizations in 30 countries representing Armenian Diaspora communities.

[14](#). (C) The Ambassador previously had called on Vahan

Hovhanissian at the National Assembly, but we were given to understand that Markarian wanted to meet the Ambassador for himself. Not able to attend the December 11 meeting, due to foreign travel, was the remaining top-ranking Dashnak Armen Rustamian, who chairs the Foreign Relations Committee in parliament and is also the ARF's official delegate on the governing coalition council.

DASHNAK VIEWS ON TURKEY -- WORRISOME MISCONCEPTIONS

15. (C) The largest part of the conversation dwelt on Turkey, and prospects for Armenian rapprochement with Ankara. The senior ARF leaders expressed their willingness -- indeed desire -- to normalize relations with Turkey and achieve an open border. However, they were quite clear that they were not prepared to do so at the expense of any soft-pedaling of Armenia's insistence on Turkish admission of guilt for the Armenian massacres and acceptance that those events constituted a "genocide." Markarian pointed out that while it would benefit Armenia to have an open border with Turkey, the last 15 years have shown that Armenia can survive without this -- and if need be could do so "for another 300-400 years."

16. (C) Markarian said that Turkey has three "unacceptable" pre-conditions to normalization: 1) Armenia's declaration that it has no territorial claims on Turkish land, 2) that Armenia stop pursuing worldwide recognition of the "Armenian Genocide," and 3) holding the Turkish-Armenian relationship hostage to a pro-Azerbaijani settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Markarian called the first point "humiliating to Armenia's national dignity." He said that the Government of Armenia has nothing on its agenda about

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claims on Turkish land. However, he went on to declare that, "We cannot interfere with the rights of future generations" to make territorial claims against Turkey.

17. (C) He argued that Turkish proposals for any kind of historical commission to examine the genocide was an "evil, sneaky" effort, aimed at luring Armenia into an endless, fruitless discussion, and thereby to divert the international community from recognizing the genocide. Markarian and his colleagues dismissed the suggestion that Turkish leaders might honestly lack accurate knowledge of the "genocide" history, and that a commission could help lead to Turkish understanding and eventual acceptance. Asserting that PM Erdogan himself is a "Hamshen" (an Armenian forcibly converted to Islam in the 17th Century, according to their telling), our interlocutors insisted it was impossible that GOT leaders did not know the true facts of the Armenian massacres.

18. (C) Markarian said that the best way forward would be for PM Erdogan and the Turkish government simply to admit the "genocide" and let the healing begin. He argued that a U.S. declaration that the 1915 massacres constituted genocide would "help Turkey to speak openly about this" and face their past. He expressed great confidence that this would be a quick and simple solution to detoxifying almost 100 years of bad blood between Turkey and Armenia. Manoyan chimed in that Armenians will never back away from demands that Turkey acknowledge its "genocide" guilt. Hovhanissian said he was completely convinced that nothing bad could come of U.S. "genocide" recognition. He compared it to asking Jews to concede that the Holocaust might not have actually happened. It was simply unacceptable.

19. (C) Markarian asserted that the issue unites all Armenians, pointing out that -- with no real organization or promotion by anyone -- each April 24 Remembrance Day hundreds of thousands of Armenians flock to the Armenian Genocide Memorial to lay flowers. The Ambassador relayed the

assessment of U.S. experts on Turkey, who were convinced that if the U.S. were publicly to label the events "genocide" it would lead to a major, long-lasting rupture in U.S.-Turkish relations, as well as take any hope of Turkish-Armenian rapprochement off the table for the foreseeable future. The Dashnaks clung tenaciously to their view that "genocide" recognition would solve everything in a quick, easy stroke.

JAVAKHETIA AND GEORGIA'S ARMENIAN MINORITY

¶10. (C) Markarian asserted that tensions are growing in Georgia's ethnic-Armenian province of Javakhetia and with Georgia's Armenian minority generally. He said that if steps were not taken, the region "risks an explosion" and suggested it could "become like South Ossetia or Abkhazia. He also suggested that Russia could exploit grievances of the Armenian minority to drive a wedge between Georgian-Armenians and the Georgian government, and thereby expand its destabilizing influence in Georgia.

¶11. (C) Markarian complained about a reputed Georgian law requiring all state officials -- including local government officials -- to be fluent Georgian speakers. Noting that Javakheti-Armenians tend to speak Armenian as a first language and Russian as a second, and most are not able to speak Georgian, he commented that the effect is to impose what amounts to a colonial government on the Armenian minority population. Georgian officials are sent from Tbilisi to administer local government structures in the Armenian-majority districts. He also mentioned that the Armenian population is twice as poor as other rural Georgians, and requested that some Georgian supplemental funds be spent in Javakhetia to help the local population. Markarian said that the ARF wants badly to avoid any blow-up in Javakhetia, because this would be harmful to the critical relationship between the two countries. (NOTE: Reftel suggests a different possible ARF agenda for Javakhetia, which is unconfirmed, but bears watching. END NOTE.)

RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL GAME

¶12. (C) Markarian found it worrisome that Russia is now "pressuring" Armenia toward rapprochement with Turkey. Markarian saw this as part of a Russian strategy to establish with Turkey a joint dominance over the Black Sea region. He said "it is always painful for Armenia when Turkey and Russia make deals together, and this is what we see happening

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today." Markarian said it was "obvious" that Moscow is in a "pro-Turkish mood." As evidence, he cited that Russian newspapers had refused to publish a recent open letter on Turkey by Armenian intellectuals. Manoyan added that Russian authorities had opposed plans by Russian-Armenians to organize a conference in Moscow in honor of the 60th anniversary of the international convention on genocide.

¶13. (C) In a difficult-to-follow argumentation, Markarian asserted that U.S. failure to recognize the "Armenian Genocide" pushed Turkey into Russia's arms, whereas U.S. recognition would strengthen U.S.-Turkish relations. The U.S. must protect its own interests and presence in the region by acknowledging "genocide" and by "promoting but not forcing" reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey. (COMMENT: The ARF tends to be more Russophobic than is the norm in Armenia. Many of its senior leadership are former Diasporan Armenians who have re-settled in Armenia in the last 20 years, who did not grow up as part of the Soviet Union and lack the Soviet cultural ties common to many Armenians. END COMMENT.)

OF A VISA AND DASHNAK-U.S. RELATIONS

¶14. (C) Markarian had opened the meeting with a plea for "better relations" between the USG and the worldwide Dashnaksutyun organization. The Ambassador was puzzled by this, having twice met senior ARF leaders during her short tenure in Yerevan to date. Markarian continued to argue somewhat opaquely for "stronger, more direct relations" between the ARF Bureau and Washington. This segued into his complaint that he was unable to get a U.S. visa. He urged that this be corrected. (NOTE: Markarian has a "00" hit in the visa lookout system. END NOTE.) Markarian moved on to the Turkey topic, obviating the need to respond directly to his visa complaint.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) This meeting showed that ARF party doctrines remain in play. The party shows an almost willful refusal to understand the Turkish point of view, or the view of many of their fellow Armenians who are longing for an open border, normal relations with Turkey and the benefits both would bring. The ARF is dogmatically convinced that the key to unlock everything good is simply to keep demanding "genocide" recognition until they achieve this goal. More worrisome was the ARF leaders' comparison of Javakhetia to South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

YOVANOVITCH